



# CONNECTICUT AFL-CIO

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Good afternoon, Senator Prague and Representative Ryan, my name Tom Carusello and I am the Political Director for the CT AFL-CIO. We represent over 200,000 working men and women in the State of Connecticut.

I am here today to testify in favor of H.B. No. 6545 (RAISED) Labor and Public Employees. AN ACT CONCERNING THE RIGHT TO ORGANIZE FOR CERTAIN EMPLOYEES.

This bill goes a long way to ensure that no worker in CT is denied the rights of all other employees. It will end discrimination against certain employees who, today, are denied the right to join or form a union for no good purpose.

We support this bill unequivocally because it would allow many workers the right to "free association." It ends exemptions in the law concerning organizing that the state has no reason to continue. It is a big step along the way to organizing rights for all workers in CT but until the title is AAC the Right To Organize For All Employees, there will still be workers in CT who are being relegated to second class status. In this case, it is the people on the lowest rung of our economic ladder.

This is a truly important and historic bill but it leaves out a significant group of workers in CT and they are the 20,500 CT residents who happen to work in agriculture.

Make no mistake that agriculture in CT is big business. Many of the agricultural businesses in CT are doing tens of millions of dollars worth of business. These are hardly family farms.

Understand that what we propose is not cutting edge, though I wish it were. There are nineteen states in this country where agricultural workers can join or organize a union. Among them are MA, ME and NJ, the Garden State. It should also be noted that the mushroom plant that, when in CT, fought the right to organize for its employees was sold and moved to PA where mushroom workers can organize.

What we propose is to give the hard working, immigrant, low wage worker some protection and a voice in their working conditions. It is not enough to say well at least they have a job, as Rev. Jesse Jackson said to me one day, slaves had jobs too.

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Also understand that the rules for other workers in CT do not apply to those working in this industry. While most of the workers in agriculture are at the low end of the wage scale and are people of color, they are not even covered by the forty hour workweek or overtime laws. These people are most likely to be exploited, most in need of a voice at work, yet we choose to continue to exclude them from the rights granted most other workers.

They are in many cases immigrants who, unfortunately, are ripe for exploitation. Attached to my testimony is a press release from 2007 where Imperial Nursery of Granby, CT agreed to an out of court settlement with a dozen Guatemalan immigrants who thought they were being hired to plant trees in North Carolina and ended up working 80 hours a week in CT for \$3.75 per hour. The lawsuit against Imperial Nursery was appalling, including the charge of human trafficking.

This is not a story from the 1930s but from Connecticut in 2007. Imperial Nursery is an agri-business doing somewhere around \$40 million of business per year and is owned by Griffin Land and Nursery, which is a large corporation involved in land development. It is a publicly traded company on the NASDAQ. Hardly a family farm.

Also attached is page 3 and 4 of an application for employment at a nursery in Bethel, CT. I showed those pages to our attorney, who has had a hand in writing much of the labor statutes in the state and he told me that "he never saw a document like that."

If you look at it, you will see that the applicant must initial each item to be considered for employment and most of the document is intended to have the applicant initial away his or her rights. Understand that many of the people applying for these jobs have difficulty with the English language let alone law.

I attached these items to show you what is going on in agriculture in CT and point out that the workers who most need protections and a voice at work are still being excluded.

Again, we are strongly supporting this bill and thank the committee for its good work. We hope that before the JF deadline, we can come together and craft language that will begin to change the climate for all workers in CT, including agricultural.